Mothers of prevention

Schoolgirls in Lancashire and Yorkshire are falling prey to sinister gangs of pimps. Two men have been sent to jail, but the girls’ mothers, not the police, are at the forefront of the crackdown. Why are the authorities so reluctant to get involved?

Investigation by Julie Bindel
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At the crown court in Preston on August 10, a trial involving two Asian men caused unusual interest across a number of cities in the north of England. The defendants, Zulfqar Hussain and Qaiser Naveed, were each sentenced to five years and eight months for abduction, sexual activity with a child, and the supply of a controlled drug.

They had both pleaded guilty, and they were placed on the sex offenders' register for life.

It seemed a shabby, seedy episode, probably typical of many cases down the years that have involved exploitative men and naive women. Yet, until these convictions, the police in over a dozen towns and cities, including Leeds, Sheffield, Blackburn and Huddersfield, had appeared reluctant to address what many local people had perceived as a growing problem - the groups of men who had been preying on young, vulnerable girls and ensnaring them into prostitution.

It was a very uncomfortable scenario, not least because many of these crimes had an identifiable racial element: the gangs were Asian and the girls were white. The authorities, in the shape of politicians and the police, seemed reluctant to acknowledge this

aspect of the crimes; it has been left to the mothers of the victims to speak out.

Maureen's daughter Jo was one of Hussain and Naveed's victims, having been groomed by them and a number of other Asian men when she was 14. Jo went missing from her Blackburn home 90 times during the six-month period in 2005 that she was in Hussain and Naveed's clutches.

"I was told by one police officer that he did not 'want to start a race riot' by arresting Pakistani men for sexual offences," Maureen said. During the six months that Jo was in the clutches of these men, they raped, beat and abused her to the point where, says her mother, she did not even know who she was any more. Eventually, after she was attacked by Hussain and Naveed with an iron bar, Jo somehow found the courage to report them to police, and they were arrested. The case took 16 months to come to court. In the meantime, other pimps, undeterred by the impending trial, continued to go about their business.

So what are the police doing? Lancashire police say that in the past few months they have sent letters to 70 men who were believed to be spending an unusual amount of time with young girls. The letters warn the men that the girls are underage; the men are required to sign the letter, confirming they have received and read it.

The details are left on file - but there is no guarantee that the police will take any further action if the grooming continues.

Blackburn, in common with many northern towns, is experiencing a huge upsurge in pimping, and it is an unpalatable truth for the authorities - and indeed the police - that many of the newest wave of pimps come from within the Asian community. Research, conducted in 2005 and involving 106 families seeking help from the Leeds-based campaigning organisation Coalition for the Removal of Pimping (Crop), found that in Yorkshire alone more than 30 girls were sexually exploited, with some being forced into prostitution, by what Crop says are predominantly Asian networks. As many as 200 families have gone to the organisation for advice.

Many affected parents are unhappy with the police response. As this piece goes to press, the families are meeting lawyers to discuss possible action against the police. This could result in the biggest civil action ever brought against police for failing to protect children from sexual predators.

Alice Knowles, a chief inspector and the officer with responsibility for Operation Engage, set up by the police and the local authority in Blackburn to tackle the sex-grooming problem, insists her force takes a robust approach to tackling the problem of sexual predators such as Hussain and Naveed. "We work very closely with social services and other agencies to educate and prevent young people becoming victims, and to target and arrest offenders," says Knowles. She believes the recent sentencing of Hussain and Naveed reflects the serious nature of this crime, and that police will "continue to work very hard to demonstrate that this sort of behaviour will not be tolerated in Lancashire".

The Mall in Blackburn is popular as a meeting place for the town's young men and women. Set on two floors, with over 100 high-street stores, it is brightly lit and usually busy. It teems with young women with pushchairs, elderly people window-shopping, and teenagers meeting up with their friends. The crackle of security guards' radios mingles with the cheesy piped music.

Not everyone is there to shop. Well-dressed Asian teenage boys can be found on the lookout for young white girls, following them around those stores that sell cheap jewellery and perfume. Meanwhile, older men sit on the benches, watching their workers and potential recruits in action. The older men are "employing" the boys to chat up the girls and eventually hand them over.

The Mall is widely known locally as the Lap because of the way young men and girls circle around the arcade, seeking each other out. The girls, keen to hook up with a boyfriend, call it "doing the Lap". Young men stop to chat to the giggling girls, teasing and flirting. To many, they look like any other group of teenagers. One security guard, asked if the men are pimps, said he neither knew nor cared. "It's the girls," he says, "they love the Pakis. We can't get a look in." Nearby, a young man takes two of the girls into a shop, where he buys them make-up and perfume. Later on, the groups of men move on to the Vue cinema complex near Blackburn station. The younger men are on bicycles, the older ones in expensive-looking cars, sound systems blaring out bhangra and gangster rap. Girls begin to approach them, and are soon driven away in cars by the older men. It is possible that they are taken to "slag houses", where they will be sold for sex.

Meanwhile, at the Lap and the Vue, the young men swagger up and down the road wearing gold chains and diamond earrings, and clicking their fingers at girls hovering close by.

Gemma cannot remember ever being happy, although her mother, Anni, says she was a contented child until she reached the age of 13. That was the day she fell out of puppy love. It was the day that Amir, her 24-year-old boyfriend, chose to brutally rape her.

Gemma had been introduced to Amir by a 15-year-old boy at her Blackburn school. A shy girl with little confidence, she was extremely flattered when she was charmed and actively pursued by the boy, who was thought of by many of the girls at her school as a "dish". When Gemma became enamoured of her new boyfriend, he introduced her to his 24-year-old "cousin", who began plying her with cannabis and alcohol. She initially enjoyed feeling "grown-up" and rebelling against her parents. Soon, Anni noticed dramatic changes in Gemma's behaviour and appearance.

The date Gemma was raped was important - Amir, a seasoned pimp, was well aware of the law. If anyone has sex with a girl under 13, there is a strong risk of being arrested for having sex with a minor. Once they reach 13, however, unless the victim makes a complaint to the police, nothing will happen. Recommendations following the Soham murders clearly state that police should arrest in cases where older males have sex with a child under the age of 16. However, police rarely take action unless the victim complains, thereby allowing the pimps and their customers to act with impunity.

From Gemma, and other girls in her situation, there will be no complaint to the authorities. They are afraid to give evidence, or refuse to.

"That is why I am so proud of Jo," says Maureen, talking immediately after Hussain and Naveed were sentenced. "Although she had been through the most horrendous physical and mental torture at the hands of those two, she somehow found the courage to go to the police."

The pimps are, of course, highly manipulative. Ensnaring vulnerable and unconfident girls, they make them dependent by giving expensive gifts and constant compliments. After embarking on a sexual relationship with them, the abusers begin to control them with threats and brutality, before selling them to other men for sex. There are obvious signs for parents to look out for, experts say. Girls transforming from childish and naive to angry, hardened and overtly sexualised, and coming home drunk, smelling of smoke, truanting from school and going missing from home.

"The abuse these girls suffer is horrendous," says Aravinda Kosaraju, a researcher at Crop, which has in the past been funded by the Home Office and has recently received a large lottery grant in order to develop its work. "The pimps even use pregnancy as a form of punishment," says Kosaraju. "We worked with two girls who were made pregnant by customers and then forced to have backstreet abortions." Crop was founded by the late Irene Ivison, a mother of three who died during a routine operation. Her daughter Fiona, a bright girl from a happy home in Sheffield, was lured by a pimp masquerading as her boyfriend when she was 14.

Having been successfully groomed, by the time she was 17 she was dead, murdered by a customer.

Crop researchers have been tracking the pimping gangs for over a decade, and have built up a valuable database of knowledge about the pimping gangs, based on hundreds of stories from parents and victims. However, the pimps are largely able to operate with impunity. "If we had not pushed and pushed about this issue," says Anni, "I believe that Hussain and Naveed would still be out there, just like my child's abusers are."

Anni, along with other affected mothers, has put pressure on the police to respond by using the local press to back their campaign for justice.

Blackburn is Jack Straw's constituency, and both Anni and Maureen have visited him to beg for help. "I have had two cases at my constituency surgery over the past two years," Straw said, "and have discussed this with the police, council, community leaders and the Lancashire Telegraph." The paper launched the Keep Them Safe campaign last year, following an investigation of several cases of Asian pimping gangs.

Under the control of the pimps, the girls develop something akin to Stockholm syndrome, where they begin to have empathy and sympathy for their abusers. Shirley Gorek, a former social worker employed by Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council to advise on child sexual exploitation, has run support groups for girls caught up with pimps. She found the girls can get completely brainwashed by their abusers. "It is almost as if they are

programmed into a cult," she says. "There is often no getting through to them."

The pimps' methods of brainwashing often rely on making the victim feel responsible for their welfare. "Amir got me into prostitution by making me feel sorry for him," says Gemma. "He said he was in debt to his landlord, and I was the only way he could make money. I would have done anything for him."

Not all the girls are from disadvantaged backgrounds. A recent national survey by Barnardo's found that, of underage children selling sex, nearly half still lived with their families, with only 14% being in care.

Pimping is lucrative. According to the Metropolitan Police Vice Squad, a pimp can make £300,000 to £400,000 a year selling a 16-year-old girl. There is, appallingly, no shortage of men who wish to buy them. The criminals often use the girls themselves to recruit their neighbours and school friends into the gangs. One mother, who used to drive around the town looking for her daughter when she went missing, says she once saw an older teenage girl apply make-up to two young girls in the street, while older Asian men, whom she recognised as pimps, waited by their BMWs. "The girls then were told to perform a 'sexy dance' for them," says Jean. "But they were so young! I had watched them skipping earlier."

Despite evidence from rigorous research by organisations such as Crop that the gangs are largely made up of men from the Pakistani Muslim communities, many are determined to downplay

this. "What we're dealing with is gross criminality," says Kosaraju. "That should be confronted whatever the race of the perpetrator."

Mike Cunningham, an assistant chief constable with Lancashire police, says he is aware that several recent cases reported to police in Lancashire have involved Asian men, but that the issue of sexual grooming of young girls is not based solely on race or culture.

"Offenders can and do come from a variety of cultural backgrounds," says Cunningham, "and we deal with each case on its own individual merit." He says he is not aware of "any accusations of racism from the accused or their respective communities".

Historically, many of Britain's pimps have come from immigrant communities - Jews in the early 20th century, Jamaicans and Maltese in the 1950s and '60s. White, British-born pimps have tended to operate as individuals, rather than within criminal gangs. In recent years, however, young Asian men have been operating in formal, organised networks in the north of England, particularly in the impoverished towns with high unemployment and racial disharmony.

Taxi drivers, shop owners and security guards who work in the shopping arcades where the girls are recruited are also involved, one police officer (who asked not to be named) told me.

"Police seem to be very cautious about this. They fear being branded racist," says Mohammed Shafiq, the press spokesman for the Ramadhan Foundation, a Muslim youth education charity

based in Rochdale. Shafiq recently tried to address some imams and community leaders, but did not get very far. "They all had a 'no comment' policy," says Shafiq, "but our organisation is clear that it is going on, and that it is linked to drug dealing. We can't simply blame the BNP."

As well as simple opportunism, pimping of white females by black and ethnic-minority men can be a type of revenge against whites. "My parents ran a grocery shop," says Hussein, who admits to being part of the pimping gangs in the late 1990s. "They had hardly any money, even though they worked their backsides off. White people treated them like shit, like they were their servants." Hussein says he took "great pleasure" in having young white girls at his beck and call, knowing their parents would be out of their minds with worry. Although Hussein was reported to the police, he was never arrested for any crime, and is now working in Leeds.

The issue of black and Asian men being labelled "pimps" is deeply contentious, but not, say parents, a reason for police to turn a blind eye. It can, and does, however, fuel racism. Black men and pimping are linked through popular culture - from the African American Iceberg Slim's classic autobiographical novel, Pimp, to the glamorised depictions of pimping by hip hop and rap artists.

In 2004, a controversial documentary on the topic of Asian pimps, Edge of the City, focused on the mothers of two girls being pimped by Pakistani gangs in Bradford, West Yorkshire.

But before it could be screened, a number of black and Asian groups, media such as the newspaper Eastern Eye, and websites

including Blink (Black Information Link) organised an e-mail petition to pressurise Channel 4 into pulling the programme, arguing that its makers' sole purpose was to perpetuate racism against Asian communities. The channel received over 500 e-mails in protest. The BNP capitalised on the row by hinting that all Asian men were a sexual threat to white girls.

Originally due to be screened in May 2004, three years after the Bradford race riots, the documentary was pulled from the schedule at the request of the West Yorkshire Police. A spokesman at the time said police had found no evidence of the alleged systematic exploitation, and the chief constable of West Yorkshire Police warned Channel 4 that he felt the timing of the programme could contribute to community unrest in Bradford and possibly even provoke public disorder in the city.

A number of families affected by Pakistani pimping gangs have said that police inaction and the refusal of white liberals to acknowledge the problem has resulted in more girls being at risk than ever before. "We are still battling to get recognition that what we are dealing with is organised crime against children," says Kosaraju.

Sunny Hundal, editor of the online magazine Asians in Media, has followed the phenomenon of Asian pimping gangs. "Although it's obvious that it's young, lawless Pakistani boys," says Hundal, "it's tricky to make this an issue about race or religion when neither are contributing factors." However, he does believe some young Asian men "hold very disparaging attitudes towards white girls, thinking they're 'easy'".

Jean is a lively woman in her forties, living with two of her three children in a neat terraced house in the east side of Blackburn. Her daughter Sally, coming up to her 16th birthday, is now estranged from her as a result of being brainwashed and abused by men from the Asian pimping gangs. "Sally was a shy girl before this happened," says Jean, "and dressed fairly demurely, but all of a sudden she was wearing heavy make-up and dressed like a prostitute. At that stage I had no idea what was going on."

Jean's eldest daughter, Sally, was targeted at school at 13 by slightly older Asian boys. They were on the payroll of older men who run pimping operations in the town. The modus operandi of the gangs is that pimps employ school-aged boys to make the initial connection with suitable girls and befriend them. The girls are then introduced to men they are told are older relatives of the boys. The older men take them out in flash cars and buy them gifts. Soon, however, it is payback time, and the girls are sold to men from private flats, hotels and cars.

"All of a sudden Sally was only interested in hanging out with Pakistani boys," says Jean. "She started saying I was racist, and that is why I objected to her hanging out with them."

Jean was soon to find out just how indoctrinated her daughter had become when she discovered Sally's photographs and profile were posted on a website. She was posing with the flag of Pakistan. There were 97 names of Asian men posted on it who had made contact with her. She was asking for Asian men to "date". She said she hated white people. There were other girls' photographs on the site, one of whom Sally had recruited, as were other girls who were being pimped. Jean's boyfriend went

online, pretending to be a girl. One of the men asked: "Are you better than Sally?"

Preying on her shyness and vulnerability, the pimps told Sally she was beautiful and would be treated like a princess if she showed them loyalty. They also convinced her that her family did not care about her, saying her parents would think she was a "slag" for having Pakistani boyfriends. "We parents are doing more to investigate these criminals than the police," says Jean. "My husband and I have sat for hours outside hot spots, taking down car-registration numbers. I have given the police dozens of names from my daughter's mobile phone, but they have done nothing."

The pimps are adept at trading on teenage rebellion and use similar methods, according to Crop, of convincing the girls all white people are racist. This is part of the controlling process, to instil guilt in the girls. "Like most teenagers, I was going through a phase of arguing with my mum," says Gemma. "Amir told me they didn't understand me and were racist and ignorant. I believed him." Gemma was given an Asian name by Amir, and told she had to read the Koran, a story support workers tell me is not uncommon. "They erode the girls' identities," says Kosaraju, "to make them more compliant and needy."

Few of the girls know, or are willing to acknowledge, they are being pimped. Because they claim to love the men, and think of them as their boyfriends, police often see that as an admission from the girls of consent. "As far as I was concerned, Amir was my boyfriend," says Gemma. "When he told me I had to sleep with his friends, I had no idea he was being paid for it. I was on a lot of drugs and he said I had to pay for them."

Where there is pimping, there are other forms of serious and organised crime. Some Asian pimps in Rotherham are also involved in drug dealing and gun crime. Although shootings in the town are rare, the girls caught up with the pimps have disclosed that many of them carry guns. Pimps traffic the girls between towns and cities. The United Kingdom Human Trafficking Centre (UKHTC) has appointed Amanda Palmer, a detective sergeant, to investigate trafficking within the UK. "There is no doubt that, according to current law, these girls have been trafficked," says Palmer, "but to date, there has not been a conviction under this legislation."

One of the many tragedies resulting from this phenomenon is how it is fuelling racism and mistrust of whites towards Pakistanis where little existed previously. Although racism can be rife in towns such as Blackburn, Jean claims that before her daughter's life was ruined she bore no animosity towards the Asian community. Things have changed. When ordering a taxi, Jean spends several minutes looking through the telephone directory, explaining she is looking for a "white-run firm". "If an Asian man came to my door, I might have a flashback, and go mad," says Jean.

In the meantime, organisations such as Crop continue battling with the police to act on the intelligence they have built up. Progress may be round the corner in the shape of the legal action the parents have started - and many parents I spoke to are feeling cautiously optimistic after the convictions of Hussain and Naveed. "This is just the beginning," says Maureen, "but I think it will have sent a message to other abusers that the net is closing in on them and they can no longer get away it."

Gemma's pimp tired of her when she turned 16, but she still has a drug habit and is irrevocably damaged from the sexual torture and degradation she endured. Although many young women do escape the clutches of these predators and go on to repair their lives, some will be drawn into street prostitution, violent relationships and self-harming lifestyles.

Jean's daughter Sally is in foster care, but is still being picked up regularly by pimps and raped by men who do not even know her name. She is now totally estranged from her mother, whom she recently threatened to stab. "I keep having nightmares about what they have done to her," says Jean, "and about what her life has become. I want to kill them. I have told police to go and do something, or I might lose control and do something myself."

In all of these cities, victims such as Sally are facing an explosive mix of brutality and denial - from the authorities and the Pakistani community. It seems easier for many people to pretend it is not happening. The girls involved just don't have that choice.

All of the names of victims and their relatives have been changed to protect identities